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A COMMUNITY GIVING A HELPING HAND:
TRI-STATE DISTRICT TORNADO

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On the evening of February 24, 1935, a deadly tornado ravaged through the Tri-State District towns of Commerce, Douthat, Picher, Hockerville, Ok, Shoal Creek, Stapleton, MO, and Baxter Springs, KS.¹ The total number of people impacted from the rare February tornado totaled 286.² This disaster did not happen at an ordinary time in history, it happened at a time when many families were struggling to feed and cloth their families and at a time when the national unemployment rate exceeded twenty-five percent during the "Great Depression." During this time of great distress and unemployment, a community that was centered around mining and farming as source of income was able to come together to help one another when a natural disaster struck. The Tri-State District community put their own struggles aside to join in on an effort to help one another recover from this horrible disaster even at a time when difficult was a way of life.

Given that the time period was during the "Great Depression" the determination of the victims who were out of work mainly due to silicosis or miners' comp was that of people in desperation. Many of the miner's who could not work was due to deteriorating health and a job market that was unforgiving at the time. During the 1930ss chronic industrial disease was a major problem within the Tri-State District and the American workforce.³ The families who were affected by the tornado were dealing with a variety of problems before the storm ever hit. Many

¹ "1 Dead, 36 Hurt in Storm: Ravaged more than half a dozen communities." *Joplin Globe*, February 25, 1935. Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District, Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive, Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

² Ottawa Co. Tornado in American Red Cross Records. Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21, Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

³ Markowitz, Gerald and David Rosner. "The Street of Walking Death: Silicosis, Health, and Labor in the Tri-State Region, 1900-1950." *The Journal of American History*, vol. 77, no. 2 (September, 1990): 526.

families had children with very little education or chance to get a good education. With mining being the prime source of income in the Tri-State Mining District, many wives and children would have to work if their father or husband became ill with silicosis or miners' comp. With women having to work this lead to worsened living conditions, because a wife who would usually do the cooking, cleaning, gardening, and many other types of duties around a home would alter them from being able to accomplish all of this. The children of the sick miner's would also have to begin working at a much younger age, usually in the same mines where their father became ill. This would halt the children from any education at all, and from doing regular household chores.⁴ One might believe that living in such a difficult time in a place that was built around mines, that people would isolate themselves and offer nothing to others in need. This however did not change people's eagerness to help one another. Local schools even contributed with the effort to aid the victims with a donation of \$65.00 from Picher Public Schools to the American Red Cross. Students of the school held a fundraiser in order to add to the funding for the Red Cross.⁵

"Living conditions in the Tri-State District ranged from jerry-rigged shack dwellings and business establishments to small farms..."⁶ People in the Tri-State area found different methods to support their families. "While some farmed, gardened, and cared for livestock in their free

⁴ Gibson, Arrell M. "Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma." Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972.

⁵ Receipt from Picher Public Schools to Red Cross in American Red Cross Records. Box 38, Folder 1974 8-14, Picher, Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

⁶ Gibson, Arrell M. "A Social History of the Tri-State District." *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 37, no. 2 (1959): 182.

time, others hunted and fished in the streams and timberland near the mines.”⁷ Living and working during the “Great Depression” was difficult enough without living near mining towns, which in turn, amplified the living conditions the people in this community were challenged to face everyday. Many people were challenged with very low income each month and very few jobs to pick from. Families struggled during this time, for example a family with six or more children only making \$7.20 a month from the “New Deal” program called F.E.R.A or the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, which was a program that provided money for unemployed workers during this time. This was the only source of income some families had and in turn, made a natural disaster striking them be a crushing blow.⁸

Families who were victimized by the deadly tornado that hit the Tri-State District early in the evening of Sunday February 24, 1935 had incomes ranging from \$10.00 per week to \$20.00 per week, with their main source of income coming from mining.⁹ Most of these families had an average of five children, along with an older grandparents living with them. Many of the victims of the tornado did not have anywhere to go after their home was destroyed.¹⁰ The extent of aid and help available to victims of natural disaster during this time period from State and Federal agencies was limited. The American Red Cross, a very well established state and national

⁷ Gibson, 183.

⁸ “Disaster Face Sheet, Hynes.” February 26, 1935. American Red Cross Records, Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21, Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

⁹ “Disaster Face Sheet.” February 26, 1935. American Red Cross Records. Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21, Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

¹⁰ “Disaster Face Sheet, Jones.” February 26, 1935. American Red Cross Records, Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21, Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

organization was, by far, the most excellent and well organized group and was quickly deployed to aid all of the victims of the tornado.¹¹

The Red Cross immediately gathered information and identified the number of victims, how many homes were lost, how many homes were damaged, how many barns were lost and damaged, and how many people were killed or injured.¹² The Red Cross also estimated the expenses of structures, labor to repair the structures, and hospital expenses to generate a budget to work with.¹³ By establishing what the cost of helping to repair damaged homes or to rebuild devastated homes, and medical expenses for the injured victims, the Red Cross began accepting donations to help in funding the aid for the victims of the tornado. On February 25, 1935 the Red Cross drew donations from many local businesses and people within the community. The total amount of donations received by the Red Cross was \$2,179.50, with \$1,250.00 coming from the Red Cross alone.¹⁴ On February 28th, The Oklahoma F.E.R.A Tuesday made an emergency appropriation of \$1500.00 for relief of people affected by the storm.¹⁵ Eagle Picher, which was the main mining company in Picher, Oklahoma, donated \$100.00 along with other area mining companies who donated with the utmost generosity of giving at least \$25.00 a piece. Some of the

¹¹ Ottawa Co. Tornado in American Red Cross Records. Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21, Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ "Estimate of Expenses." February 27, 1935. American Red Cross Records. Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21, Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

¹⁴ "Donations." Red Cross Storm Relief in American Red Cross Records. Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21, Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

¹⁵ "Red Cross Launches a Survey." *Joplin Globe*, February 28, 1935. Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District Picher, Oklahoma Collection in the PSU Archive. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

other mining companies who donated to the Red Cross for the victims included Manym Mining Co., Rialto Mining Co., Beck Mining Co., and Lawyers Mining Co.¹⁶ These local companies, which included many, provided the community with care and respect from the generous donations they gave. A community that depended on these local companies to put food on their tables and a steady income could not have been more appreciative.

The generous donations local companies gave for the well being of the community was not the only act of help that was provided. In addition, "Boy Scout organization of Ottawa County yesterday began work of soliciting clothing."¹⁷ Along with the Ottawa County Boy Scouts, "[t]he Picher Boy Scouts, Tuesday and yesterday worked in collecting clothing and furniture to aid stricken families in that area."¹⁸ Furthermore, the "Mayor decided to make an emergency appropriation to pay for the hospitalization of twelve Joplin persons injured in the tornado in the Stapleton addition." The city council voted unanimously on the Mayors proposal to take care of the victims.¹⁹

The American Red Cross was able to document all of the damage and injuries caused by the tornado the day after it struck. One person was killed by the devastating tornado. "Mrs. Ellen Teague of Douthat, Oklahoma, who was 69 years old, was thrown into her front yard as her home was torn to pieces. Her Husband, Mr. George Teague was critically injured after being

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ "Work of Caring for 300 Victims Begins: City Council Acts." *Joplin Globe*, February 26, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

¹⁸ *Joplin Globe*, February 28, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

thrown into the front yard also, and is now hospitalized.”²⁰ There were 36 others in the community that were injured and hospitalized, as Douthat, OK was one of the hardest hit during the storm.²¹ The Red Cross received reports of 9 buildings being destroyed, 52 buildings damaged, 31 barns damaged or destroyed, and a loss of 43 livestock with 40 of them being chickens. Out of all the damages eight buildings were rebuilt and forty-two were repaired. The number of families assisted by the Red Cross totaled fifty-four, with five volunteers helping the organization.²² In all, two hundred and eight six people were affected by the tornado ranging from two weeks old to people over eighty years old. The Red Cross assisted in replacing and repairing homes and supplying food and clothing to the victims.²³ In a letter written by Mr. M.D. Harbough to the Regional American Red Cross office in St. Louis, MO he explained to Mr. WM M Baxter Jr. that the community came together to respond to the tornado. Some of the ore producers furnished a car, which was very valuable during the relief effort. The ore producers also provided trucks for hauling lumber, furniture, etc. Services of Boy Scout troops of Picher during first week were provided also, which were much needed. Mr. Harbough added in a telegram he sent to Mr. Baxter Jr., “[t]he chapter has plenty of volunteer help and should be able

²⁰ “1 Dead, 36 Hurt in Storm: Ravaged more than half a dozen communities.” *Joplin Globe*, February 25, 1935, 1. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² American Red Cross Form 903 Rev. February 16, 1934 Disaster Relief Report February 24, 1935 in American Red Cross Records. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

²³ Report of Disaster Relief March 15, 1935 in American Red Cross Records. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

to handle the matter with financial assistance about which will wire you later.”²⁴ Mr. Harbough who was the Red Cross chapter leader in Ottawa County Oklahoma demonstrated how the community began to come together just days after the disaster.

In a radio interview days after the disaster the Red Cross Chapter Chairman was interviewed. He explained to the people how the Red Cross received funding. “During the past year the Red Cross gave relief in 128 disasters. Thirty-seven States as well as territory in Alaska were affected. Chartered by Congress the official relief agent in time of disaster, the Red Cross has never failed to meet its obligations to those affected.” He proceeded to explain how the work of the Red Cross is supported, which displays how the State and Federal Government do not contribute:

All Red Cross work is supported by annual membership dues received from citizens during the annual role call. Fifty cents of each membership, regardless of whether it's \$1.00, \$5.00, or a \$25.00 membership goes to support the national and international work of the organization. The remaining balance of each membership is used by the chapter, which secured it for work in its own community.²⁵

When the interviewer asked, “[d]oes that mean that the organization receives no funds from the Federal Government?” The chairman answered, “[t]he Red Cross receives no governmental appropriations whatsoever.”²⁶ The impact of the Red Cross in aiding this community was extraordinary. The generosity of the local businesses and people, who could spare a few cents

²⁴ Mr. M.D. Harbaugh to WM. M Baxter Jr. Telegram, Western Union, Picher, Oklahoma February 26, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

²⁵ Radio Interview of Chapter Chairman of Red Cross, American Red Cross Roll Call 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 38, Folder 1974 8-14. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

here, and a few dollars there, greatly helped the community recover from such a horrible event. Other ways the community was able to help came with providing dry clothing to those who had nothing but cold wet clothing on after the damage had been done. "Assisting in the reconstruction work will be the Tri-State Zinc and Lead Ore Producers Association. Anti-tetanus serum was ordered by the organization, and will be administered to all persons living in the Douthat area."²⁷

With numerous organizations and volunteers the Tri-State District disaster was dealt with in a careful and timely manner. In contrast to people needing aid another amazing factor took place within the community. A newspaper article explains this phenomenon best, "Sunday night, but there were surprisingly few calls for assistance. Relatives, friends, and neighbors apparently were taking care of most of the cases."²⁸ With people helping each other without asking for aid, the community of the Tri-State District can be remembered as a strong tightly knit area, in which, people will sacrifice to help one another out.

Another issue that affected the Tri-State District as well as the nation during this period of time was a storm warning system. There was no storm warning system in place in the 1930s. There were no tornado sirens, no local or national weather headquarters, no local radio stations with warning messages, and no storm spotters to warn a small town or community that severe weather was likely to strike and to take cover. The only warning system people in the 1930s and before had, would have been someone that witnessed a tornado with enough time to take cover

²⁷ "Work of Caring for 300 Victims Begins: City Council Acts." *Joplin Globe*, February 26, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

²⁸ Few Calls For Aid From Tornado Area: Approval for use of federal relief labor in rebuilding storm-destroyed structure to be asked." *Joplin News Herald*, February 26, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

after first sight. Very few people had storm shelters, but those who did have storm shelters like two Douthat families shared during the tornado proved to save lives. "Storm Cellar provided refuge for 15 members of 2 Douthat families, and probably saving all of them from serious injury or death."²⁹ Another extraordinary organization when it was vital to save lives was the Tri-State District Firefighters. "Joplin's firemen cannot be praised too highly for their gallant and effective rescue and relief work at the scene of the Stapleton tornado... They were the first there and the last to leave... I believe their work prevented considerable suffering and more serious property damage."³⁰ On February 26, 1935 a total damage report was given on all areas, which were affected by the storms destructive path. "In the great Tri-State lead and zinc fields of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Missouri, and also near Wichita, mounting reports of losses pushed estimates of damage in Sunday's tornado past the quarter million dollar mark."³¹ Without efforts from rescue workers, family, friends, and neighbors this total could have been far greater.

Areas that were not affected by the tornado nearby the affected areas joined in the effort to provide a helping hand where needed. Residents in Miami who had extra pieces of furniture, bedding, cooking utensils, and other articles which the distressed persons could use were asked to telephone 12, and the materials were gathered in a truck and taken to help aid the victims.³²

²⁹ *Joplin Globe*, February 27, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

³⁰ "After the Storm Struck." *Joplin News Herald*, February 26, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

³¹ *Joplin Globe*, February 26, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

³² *Miami News Record*, February 27, 1935. "New Call Issued in Behalf of the Tornado Victims." Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

Other aid was given to the tornado victims. "Approximately 150 families in the region around Douthat, Century, the edge of Picher and outlying districts were in acute distress," social service director of Ottawa County Miss Thelma Hall, reported to State officials. Stricken families used food, clothing, and bedding from the OERA. Houses were moved into the devastated districts with the assistance of the Red Cross.³³ The collective effort of surrounding areas to help victims broadened even deeper. Other companies and organizations joined in to provide as much help as possible. Grocery Orders were made available to needy cases. Mattresses, bed clothing and other clothing were made at county sewing rooms were also distributed to victims of the affected areas.³⁴ The local American Legion Post also added a lending hand. In Miami, Ok the American Legion also lent a hand:

Mrs. Wesley Smith and Clyde Morsey announced that the Floyd L. Perry Post No. 147 American Legion will collect household articles in a truck Saturday afternoon...several legion members will gather belongings which local residents have designated as donations, and will take them to the Tri-State Clubhouse at Picher. They will be distributed from the latter place.³⁵

With the combination of community based help and surrounding areas helping the victims, the Red Cross was able to quickly get aid to victims of great need. In all, sixty-two families registered with the Red Cross in the affected areas. The Red Cross looked at each case from the victims closely.³⁶ Every family and individual who registered with the Red Cross was

³³ "OERA Aid Given Tornado Victims." *Oklahoma City Times*, February 26, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

³⁴ *Miami News Record*, February 27, 1935. "New Call Issued in Behalf of the Tornado Victims." Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Disaster Face Sheet February 26, 1935 in American Red Cross Records. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 38, Folder H293 1932 1-21. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

interviewed and a Disaster Face Sheet was filled out by the Red Cross, which recorded the names of all household members, how many children were in the home, family income or expected family income, and what all was lost or damaged from the storm. Families who had special problems consisting mainly of very low or little income were placed as top priority in getting aid to quickly.³⁷ Some families with inadequate income had anywhere from four to eight children whom they were supporting. These families income ranged from \$2.00 a week to \$20.00 a week. The lower the income the faster the aid was given.³⁸

On a brighter note, the *Miami News Record*, reveals some of the stranger events that occurred from the tornado. "Across the street from the Hill home, a cow, owned by Mark Fehrenbach, refused to go into the cowshed to be milked a few minutes before the storm struck. The cow was carried three blocks away by the twister, and when found, could not be forced to return home. They were able to coax the cow back home Monday morning."³⁹ Another very intriguing story, "Mr. Walter Gray and his wife Mrs. Barbara Gray were reading in their living room just before the storm struck. Mr. Gray explained that he heard a noise in the back room and got up out of his chair to check on it, and when he came back into the living room a board had pierced the chair he was in a few seconds earlier."⁴⁰

During times of great distress and unemployment, communities like the Tri-State District do come together to meet one another's needs, and to help one another when a natural disaster

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ "Tornado had Freak Phrases: Survey at Baxter Reveals Pranks-Property Loss Placed at \$10,000.00." *Joplin Globe*, February 28, 1935. Picher, Oklahoma Archives, Box 159, Folder 9, Clippings from various newspapers about tornado which struck Tri-State District. Axe Library, Pittsburg State University, Pittsburg, KS.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

strikes. Family, friends, neighbors, firefighters, and the Red Cross helped bring the victims of this horrible tornado back to normal by helping rebuild and repair many damaged homes and buildings that were destroyed in the tornadoes path. Help from the local Boy Scout organizations, Mayors and City Councils, mining companies, and local businesses gave the victims of this devastating disaster the resources and extra care that was needed for a community that was already dealing with hardship. Many of the families in the Tri-State District lived with illnesses from silicosis, tuberculosis, and miners' comp and had to deal with mothers and children working in order to maintain a steady income for their families. While many of the people in this area depended on gardening, livestock, hunting and fishing to deal with low incomes, some could not afford to engage in these activities in order to help with food and a smaller grocery bill.

The American Red Cross, among all organizations that helped with aid to these families affected by the tornado, did an extraordinary job in its mission to help everyone they could. Even though the extent of aid that was available was very limited from State and Federal Government during the "Great Depression" the Red Cross was able to take on the great responsibility of organizing and operating a magnificent aid effort in order to get the victims of this tornado back to a normal life. The mining companies like Eagle Picher who donated generous sums of money to the Red Cross also showed a great compassion and sympathy toward its workers and their families. The Red Cross accomplished helping the victims in a very timely manner because of the mass amount of support that was offered by this small community, which came together in a time of need.

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